



1783

Selections
from
Cincinnati Fourteen

Volume 1

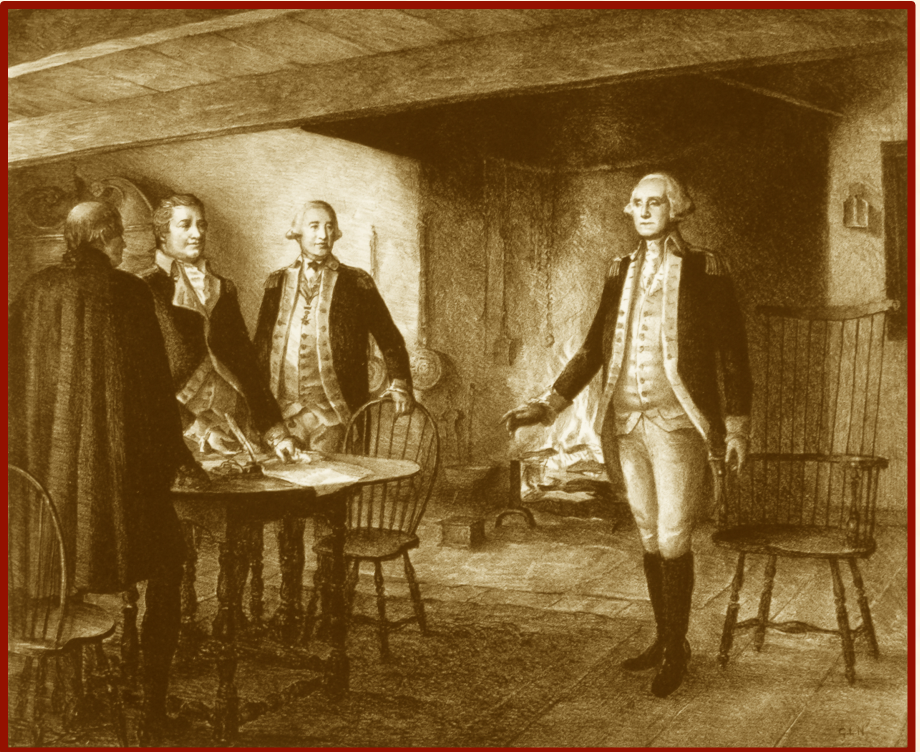
Cincinnatus

and

The Founding of the Society of the Cincinnati

The Society of the Cincinnati





General George Washington about to accept membership in the Society of the Cincinnati by signing the roster and becoming its first President General, at the request of the committee consisting of Major Generals Steuben, Knox, and Heath, at Washington's headquarters, Newburgh, N. Y., May 20, 1783. Engraving after George Laurence Nelson, 1887–1978; Washington, D.C.: Society of the Cincinnati, 1933.



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The Society of the Cincinnati



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Table of Contents

Part 1: Cincinnatus

“Who Was Cincinnatus?” (Fall 2009, page 5)	1
“Rome’s George Washington” (Fall 2009, pages 6–11)	3
“Cincinnatus and the Founders: The Society Takes Its Name” (Fall 2009, pages 12–17)	8

Part 2: The Founding of the Society

“An Army of Free Men” (Spring 2006, pages 20–27)	16
“From Citizen-Soldiers to One Society of Friends” (Spring 2008, pages 16–23)	26
“Our Allies Alone Have Saved the Society” (Spring 2008, pages 32–37)	36
“The Founding Fathers and the Society of the Cincinnati” (Fall 2008, pages 18–29)	44
“The Hidden Institution” (Spring 2009, pages 63–75)	57

The seal of the Society of the Cincinnati is centered on the page. It features an eagle with spread wings, perched atop a shield. The shield contains a classical building with columns. Above the eagle's head is a laurel wreath. The entire emblem is encircled by a border containing the text "SOCIETY OF THE CINCINNATI".

Cincinnati *Fourteen*

1783

Journal of The Society of the Cincinnati

Fall 2009

Volume 46, No. 1

WHO WAS CINCINNATUS?

The Society of the Cincinnati is a living reminder of America's Classical age—the brief historical moment from the outbreak of the American Revolution through the first few years of the nineteenth century, when Americans looked to ancient Rome for inspiration in everything from art to ethics, from politics to architecture. The name of the Society, adapted from the name of the Roman leader Cincinnatus, announced its founders intention to imitate one of the most virtuous heroes of the ancient world.

To explore this theme, we asked the Society's Taylor Sanders, professor of history at Washington & Lee University, to remind us who Cincinnatus was, and Ellen Clark, the

Society's librarian, to share her research on how Cincinnatus was remembered by the revolutionary generation. We also asked Marko

Zlatich, an expert on military uniforms, to explain how the uniform depicted in Houdon's great

Washington statue symbolizes the general's role as the modern Cincinnatus.

CIN CIN N A T U S

che chiamato dall' aratro al sacrificio di Pelia si allaccia il solo calzare d'atre e, per
disegnate dall' Oracolo. Si conserva a Versailles ed e' conosciuto sotto il nome di
Cin Cin Natu

ROME'S GEORGE WASHINGTON

By Taylor Sanders (Md.)

Professor of History, Washington and Lee University

By spring 1783 the Revolution was a painful memory for most Americans. All that remained was the signing of a definitive peace. For Washington's tiny army, still under arms and bivouacked near Newburgh, however, it was a time of discontent. Many officers had gone bankrupt in their country's service. Requests for back pay, pensions to support widows and orphans, and land grants went unheeded by a weak government. Broke, hungry, restless and anxious to return to civilian life, the army was on the edge of despair, if not mutiny. The British and their Indian allies still posed a threat to western settlement. Officers were furious over what one called "the ingratitude and villainous conduct" of a nation that the army "had rescued from tyranny."

"He retired to his humble farm and returned to his plow, working his own land in preference to a life of royalty. He continued to glory more in his poverty than others did with their riches."

The parallels with Rome in 458 B.C. are uncanny. As with the Americans, the Romans had recently thrown out their king. The state was weak and ill governed. Wracked by faction, the Roman elite refused to heed the cries of citizens, the very soldiers who protected them. The Roman commonwealth was hemmed in. To the north, only a dozen miles away, lurked the great Etruscan city of Veii, ruled by kings who threatened to conquer the new experimental

"Cincinnato," engraved by Francesco Piranesi, after Ludovico Corazzari (1785).

The Robert Charles Lawrence Fergusson Collection.

Republic that had recently thrown off an Etruscan yoke. To the west across the Tiber, vast forests blocked expansion. To the northeast and southeast lurked warlike tribes, anxious to test the new republic and expand into Rome's rich coastal plain. Hostile tribesmen controlled the border town of Actium (modern Anzio) on the coast just a short march away.

A growing population of around 120,000 men of military age, plus their families and dependents, crammed into a tiny Roman commonwealth only slightly larger than twice that of the original District of Columbia. Veterans demanded land grants to support growing families. Bad harvests, crushing debt, and famine sparked insubordination and even mutiny in the army. Unscrupulous politicians plotted the return of tyranny. The people demanded a stronger constitution, a written law code to provide modest guarantees of their rights as Roman citizens. Few members of the tiny patrician elite were willing to listen to such pleas.

Even the omens were bad that year. Wolves roamed the Capitoline Hill only to be driven off by packs of wild dogs. For Romans who fought under wolf standards, the auguries were indeed troubling. Priests performed a ritual purification on the hill to appease the gods.

That year word arrived from mounted couriers that a consular army was trapped by enemy forces at Algidus, near a key frontier pass and gateway to Latium, fewer than twenty miles away. Such times required a Dictator. Rome's leaders decided to offer the post to Lucius Quinctius Cincinnatus, an aged but able politician and general. The crisis later gave the Roman historian Livy, writing four centuries later, the opportunity to compare ancient heroism with the corruption of his time. For Livy, Cincinnatus represented the perfect Roman gentleman who, though reluctant to take power, used it sparingly and then handed it back to the people. The story was well known among eighteenth century soldiers who read it in school or in popular texts, such as Charles Rollin's *Roman History*. It's easy to understand why Continental Army officers identified with Cincinnatus and his times.

Livy believed that Cincinnatus' achievements deserved special notice. He introduced the story with an ancient exhortation, long known among orators, but used nowhere else in Livy's history: *operae pretium est audire*, roughly asserting, "Listen up, lend me your ears, here's a story of special importance." He hoisted a red flag urging readers to pay special heed—especially those, he notes, who believe that prestige and ability must always be connected with wealth.

He explained that in 458 Cincinnatus was living in poverty. His three-acre plot upstream from Rome lay on the narrow, marshy plain at the foot of the Janiculum (modern Vatican) Hill. The actions of a son, a strapping, arrogant, military hero and leader of the city's aristocratic "smart set," had led to Cincinnatus' plight. The young man had killed a Roman plebeian in a brawl. Charged with murder, he jumped bail and fled, leaving his father to pay an enormous surety that financially ruined the older man.

Livy pictured Cincinnatus hard at work digging ditches or plowing when he noticed the state barge, filled with Roman notables, pulling up at his landing. He told his wife, the long-suffering Racilia, to run to their small cottage and fetch his clean toga. He wiped the dirt from his tunic. Another historian, Livy's contemporary, adds further color. Noting that the visiting dignitaries were carrying twenty-four ceremonial axes and a royal purple toga, plus the other symbols of Dictatorship, Cincinnatus, who anticipated the objective of the visitors, said: "Because of all this, our crops will be ruined this year and we will be desperately hungry."

For Livy, Cincinnatus represented the perfect Roman gentleman who, reluctant to take power, used it sparingly and then handed it back to the people.

The origins of the office of Dictator are obscure. Appointed for a six-month term, they held total power during moments of foreign or domestic crisis. They superseded all other magistrates. Cloaked in great religious and magical meaning, Dictators were selected in the dead of night and were forbidden to ride horses during their term of office. Cincinnatus, hearing of the trapped army, reluctantly accepted the post. Hitching a ride back to Rome on the barge, he was greeted at the town docks by a crowd.

The masses were less than pleased with his appointment. They knew of his three sons' reputations for haughtiness. They knew that the father was a vigorous but fair champion of the Senatorial elite. The masses, certainly more than 95% of the people, feared him with this new and extraordinary power. They dreaded how he might use it.

Before dawn the next morning Cincinnatus appeared in the forum. He acted with dispatch. He chose as his second in command, or Master of Horse, a war hero who was so poor that he himself could not afford to



*Cincinnatus by
Pierre Lacour
(1780), Courtesy
Musee des Beaux-
Arts de Bordeaux.*

keep a mount. The new Dictator declared martial law, closed down all shops, and put a stop to all state business. He ordered all young men to appear that evening at the staging area, the Campus Martius, just across the Tiber from his own small farm. He required them to bring weapons, five days of rations, and twelve stout stakes. The older men were to help their sons prepare food for the campaign.

By the time the army set off that evening with the Dictator on foot in the lead, the siege at Algidus was in its fourth day. The army, after a forced march, reached the battlefield at midnight. After placing a blocking force at the pass to halt enemy reinforcements, Cincinnatus led a reconnaissance around the enemy line. His army quietly followed him in column and surrounded the opposing forces, entrapping the entrappers.

Once in position the men shouted their familiar war cry and began constructing an encircling ditch and palisade with their shovels and stakes. Alerted, the besieged Romans in the center of the double ring went on the offensive as did the Dictator's reinforcements. The campaign was over by dawn. "Trapped as they were between two fires, the enemy" sued for terms. After disarming the tribesmen, relieving them of their loot, and making them pass under the yoke, Cincinnatus sent them home.

Having divided the spoils among his men, the commander accepted a crown of gold from the relieved consular army. Cincinnatus freed a nearby town and marched back to Rome. He celebrated a great triumph amongst general hilarity and feasting. Roman families spread out tables of food for the victorious army. A deeply divided Rome was for a time united.

Cincinnatus resigned as Dictator after fifteen days and relinquished all its pompous symbols of office. Only official duties kept him from returning to his plow sooner. In just two weeks he had saved an army, defeated a strong enemy force, taken a town, and united a fractious people. Most remarkably, noted one ancient writer, he refused a lion's share of spoils, extensive tracts of land, and other magnificent gifts of the people. "Rather, he retired to his humble farm and returned to his plow, working his own land in preference to a life of royalty. He continued to glory more in his poverty than others did with their riches." Willing to give up everything in service to the Republic, Cincinnatus established the eternal standard of true Republican virtue.



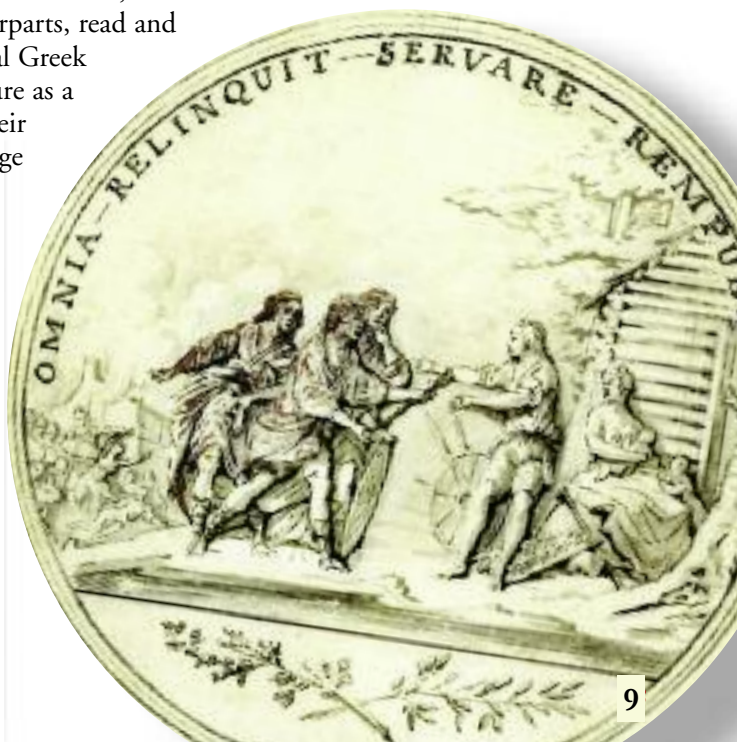
CINCINNATUS AND THE FOUNDERS

THE SOCIETY TAKES ITS NAME

by Ellen McCallister Clark, Library Director

The officers of the American Army ... possess high veneration for the character of that illustrious Roman, Lucius Quintus Cincinnatus; and being resolved to follow his example, by returning to their citizenship, they think they may with propriety denominate themselves – THE SOCIETY OF THE CINCINNATI. — Institution of The Society of the Cincinnati, adopted May 13, 1783.

When the founders of the Society of the Cincinnati chose to name their new organization in honor of the Roman hero Cincinnatus, how generally understood was this classical reference? Some who heard the name misinterpreted it altogether (British luminary Horace Walpole told the story of someone in Paris accusing the Society of creating a new apostle, *Saint Senatus*), but the officers and their educated civilian compatriots would have readily recognized the name of Cincinnatus in its plural form and the allusion to his example of selfless public service.¹ During this period, from grammar school forward, American students, like their European counterparts, read and translated classical Greek and Latin literature as a central part of their lessons. Knowledge of the languages and literature of the ancients was a basic requirement for admission to college, where classical studies dominated the curriculum. Throughout the Revolution, political writers,



Previous pages: Pierre Charles L'Enfant's 1783 sketches for the proposed medal of the Society of the Cincinnati, showing, on the obverse, Cincinnatus receiving the call to serve his country by the Roman senators; and on the reverse, Cincinnatus returned to his plow, with Fame proclaiming his virtue. The Society of the Cincinnati archives.

orators and preachers often compared the American cause to the glories of ancient Greece and Rome, and the officers themselves found inspiration and guidance in the military writings of Caesar, Thucydides, Polybius and others.

For eighteenth-century readers, the most complete account of the life of Cincinnatus was to be found in the work of the first-century Roman historian Livy, which was available in its original Latin in several published editions. But there were other contemporary works that made the Cincinnatus story even more accessible and relevant to the Revolutionary generation. As a bookseller before the war, the Society's founding father Henry Knox sold copies of Oliver Goldsmith's *Roman History*, as well as a children's book, *Beauties of History or Pictures of Virtue and Vice* by L.M. Stretch (which, Knox noted in his sales catalogue, would "inspire young minds with the love of virtue, and make them gloriously emulous of the best and greatest characters that have been exhibited among mankind.").² The Society's library recently acquired a 1777 edition of *Beauties of History*, in which the story of Lucius Quintus Cincinnatus is the primary example of the virtue "Disinterestedness:"

What an happiness it is for a state, a province, a city, when those who have the administration of the government approach, though at a distance, the sentiments and conduct we admire in Quintus! An inflexible constancy for supporting good order and discipline, tempered with a mildness and a candour proper for gaining the affection of the people; a wonderful art and ability in discerning and managing the passions; a conduct uniform, and always guided by reason, never by humour or caprice; a lover of the public good, superior to all passions and prejudices; an uniform disinterestedness, which never departs from itself....³

Even before the Society took its name, George Washington was being hailed as the American Cincinnatus. Ten days after accepting the

command of the Continental Army, Washington evoked the Cincinnatus ideal, if not the name, in his address to the New York Provincial Congress, June 26, 1775: “When we assumed the Soldier, we did not lay aside the Citizen, & we shall most sincerely rejoice with you in that happy Hour, when the Establishment of American Liberty on the most firm, & solid Foundations, shall enable us to return to our private Stations in the bosom of a free, peaceful, & happy Country.”⁴

Washington’s example inspired the officers who served under him, and his style of leadership allowed them to see themselves in the same guise. During the New York campaign in the fall of 1776, Major Lewis Morris Jr., an aide-de-camp to General Sullivan, wrote from the front to his father, Lewis Morris, a signer of the Declaration of Independence, of his hope for American success, when: “...those losses which every Man has sustained will make his Perseverance and Patriotism shine forth with more conspicuous Luster, and like a Cincinnatus or Camillus will be caressed by his country and called the Father of his People.”⁵

The Reverend William Smith was an Anglican priest living in Philadelphia who was sympathetic to the Patriot cause. In February 1776, he delivered an oration in memory of General James Montgomery and the other Americans who died in an attempt on Quebec on December 31, 1775, in which he compared Montgomery – “a *General* from the *plough!*” – to “Cincinnatus in the best days of Roman virtue.”⁶ Years later, in a sermon addressed to State Society of the Cincinnati of Pennsylvania in 1790, Smith recalled the words of another sermon he had been honored to give in 1778 at which General Washington was in attendance:

Such, to name no more, was the character of CINCINNATUS in ancient times, rising ‘awful from the Plough’ to SAVE his COUNTRY, and, his COUNTRY SAVED, returning to the Plough again, with increased dignity and lustre. Such too, if we divine aright, will future ages pronounce the character of a WASHINGTON to have been. But his presence on this occasion, as a [Masonic] brother, forbids me to add more — Seek to derive virtue from his example; let your principles animate you with intrepidity in the hour of Danger, and humanity in the moments of Triumph.

I believe there is scarcely an American officer but most cheerfully lays by his sword and uniform.



L. Quintius Cincinnatus, Armis fe Aptans (ca. 1690).

The Robert Charles Lawrence Fergusson Collection.

“I am almost tempted (you will forgive the vanity) of assuming to myself some part of the merit — at least of hinting the foundation of the Order of the Cincinnati,” Smith told his latter-day congregants of the Pennsylvania Society (although none of the Society’s founders ever mentioned this).⁷

Maryland poet Charles Henry Wharton also found meaning in the parallels between Washington and Cincinnatus. His *Poetical*

*Cincinnatus himself
never returned to his
plow better pleased.*

Epistle to His Excellency George Washington, Esq., Commander in Chief of the Armies of the United States of America, first published in Annapolis in 1779, includes a verse to remind his readers their common virtue:

Thus, when of old, from his paternal farm
Rome bad her rigid Cincinnatus arm,
Th' illustrious peasant rushes to the field;
Soon are the haughty Volsii taught to yield:
His country sav'd, the solemn triumph o'er,
He tills his native acres as before.⁸

Cordell Lee (Chip) Bragg, M.D, a present-day member of the South Carolina Society who is writing a biography of Gen. William Moultrie, recently discovered another war-date reference to Cincinnatus in a letter of General Moultrie to Gen. Nathanael Greene, written on May 5, 1783, just one week before the Society was officially founded. Moultrie was in Charleston, where he had remained since the British evacuation of that city the previous December. While the South Carolina general may have heard talk that his fellow officers up in Newburgh were planning a new organization inspired by the Roman hero, his identification with Cincinnatus' homecoming was entirely personal:

I must apologize for not answering your letter sooner especially as it gave me the first authentic account of a Peace; knowing your humanity and love for mankind I heartily congratulate you upon the occasion, the Event must give you pleasing feelings; I believe there is scarcely an American officer but most cheerfully lays by his sword and uniform. I most sincerely do, and with heartfelt joy return to the callings of a country life free from the tumultuous busy scenes of war. Cincinatus himself never returned to his plow better pleased....⁹

1 Wilmarth S. Lewis, ed., *The Yale Edition of Horace Walpole's Correspondence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1955), 29:323.

2 *A Catalogue of Books, Imported and to be Sold by Henry Knox, at the London Book-Store* (Boston, 1773).

3 L.M. Stretch, *The Beauties of History; or, Pictures of Virtue and Vice, Drawn from Real Life* (London: Printed for Edward and Charles Dilly, 1777), 1: 208.

4 Philander Chase, et al., eds. *The Papers of George Washington: Revolutionary War Series* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1985), 1:41.

5 *Collections of the New-York Historical Society for the Year 1875* (New York, 1876), 8:445-446.

6 William Smith, *An Oration in Memory of General Montgomery, and of the Officers and Soldiers, Who Fell with Him, December 31, 1775, before Quebec; Drawn Up (and Delivered February 19th, 1776)...* (Philadelphia: Printed by John Dunlap, 1776), 14-15.

7 William Smith, *A Sermon on Temporal and Spiritual Salvation: Delivered in Christ-Church, Philadelphia, Before the Pennsylvania Society of the Cincinnati* (Philadelphia: From the Press of T. Dobson, 1790), 9-12.

8 Charles Henry Wharton, *A Poetical Epistle to His Excellency George Washington, Esq., Commander in Chief of the Armies of the United States of America, from an Inhabitant of the State of Maryland...* (Annapolis, Printed 1779; London, Reprinted ... 1780), 7.

9 William Moultrie to Nathanael Greene, May 5, 1783, Moultrie Papers, Caroliniana Library, University of South Carolina, Columbia, S.C.

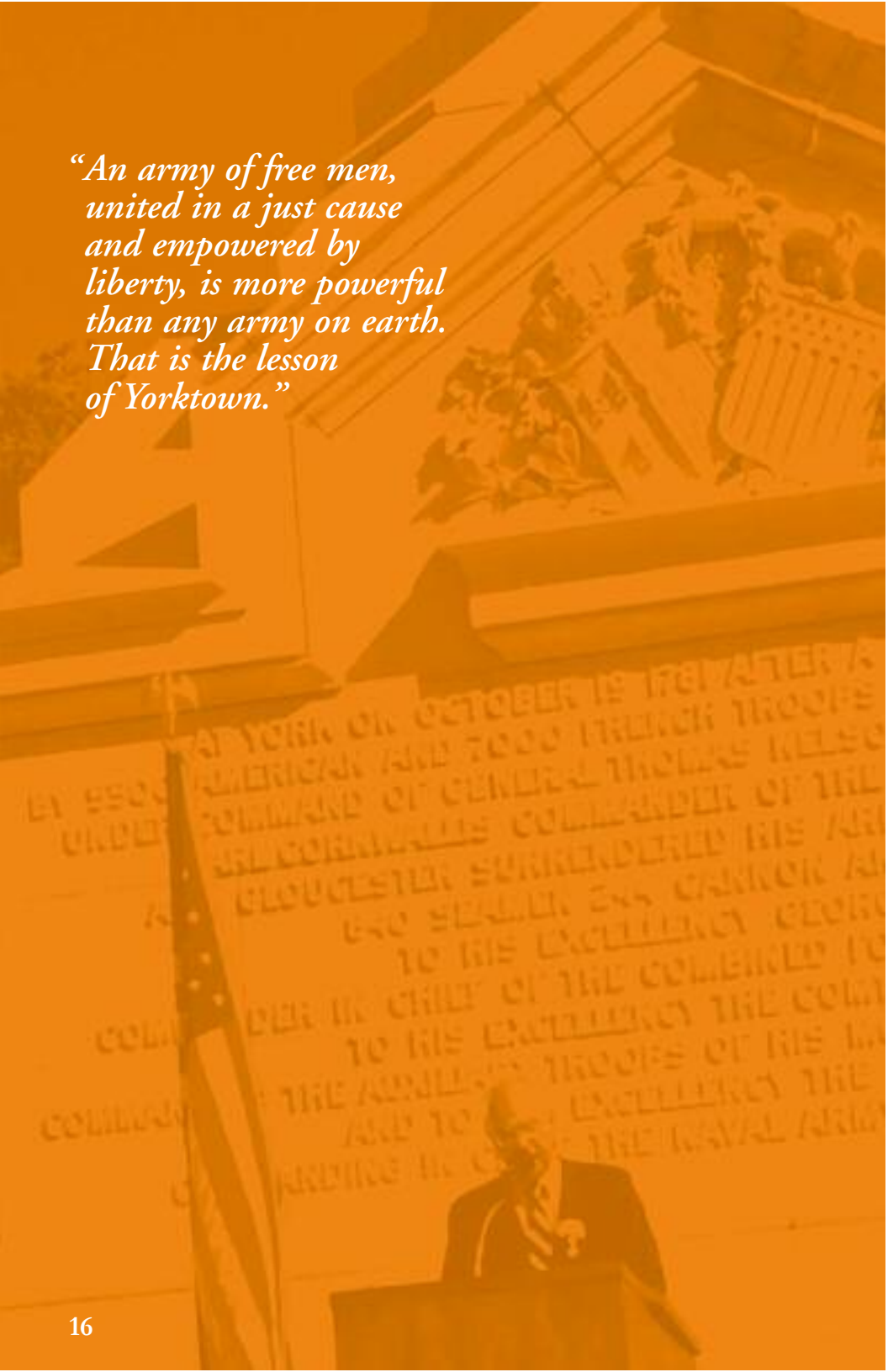


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*“An army of free men,
united in a just cause
and empowered by
liberty, is more powerful
than any army on earth.
That is the lesson
of Yorktown.”*

AN ARMY *of* FREE MEN

*Keynote address delivered by
Robert Fillmore Norfleet Jr.,
president general, at Yorktown
Day celebrations in Yorktown,
Va., October 19, 2005.*

On May 13, 1783, a group of Continental army officers gathered together at the encampment near Newburgh, N.Y., to form a perpetual brotherhood among the men who had led the combined armies of the United States and France to victory.

They called their organization The Society of the Cincinnati. They drew inspiration from the story of the ancient Roman hero, Quintus

Cincinnatus, who left the comforts of home to lead the army of the Roman republic to victory. After that war, Cincinnatus returned home, refusing any reward for his services other than the thanks and esteem of his fellow citizens.

And so it was that membership in the Society of the Cincinnati was opened to commissioned officers in the Continental service and to commissioned officers of France who had served in the American theater of operations. It was the first such organization of its kind in the United States and the first veterans' organization.

The officers who founded the Society of the Cincinnati were brave men. Many had served through the entire Revolutionary War. They had tasted victory at Trenton and Princeton, and defeat more times than they cared to admit. They had compelled the British evacuation of Boston. They had endured desperate winters at Valley Forge and Morristown. They had struggled to hold the army together when its men had nothing to eat, little to wear and no prospect of pay. They knew that defeat meant dishonor and possibly death. And they had shared victory together here at Yorktown.

They were indeed brave men, but they were afraid their countrymen would forget them and their accomplishments; afraid that they would forget that perseverance, self-sacrifice and dedication are essential to our republic and the freedoms it protects.

So, they dedicated their Society to "preserve inviolate those exalted rights and liberties of human nature for which they have fought and bled and without which the high rank of a rational being is a curse instead of a blessing."



The Continental Color Guard of the Third U.S. Infantry.

To continue this mission beyond their own generation they made their Society hereditary. They passed along the responsibility for preserving the memory of the Revolutionary achievement to their sons and grandsons.

The founders of the Society of the Cincinnati would be pleased to see us gathered here today.

They would be pleased to see that the United States has maintained and cherished its historic alliance with France and continues to acknowledge our debt to the soldiers and sailors of France who risked and gave their lives to secure the independence of the United States. They understood, perhaps better than any one of us will ever understand, that victory at Yorktown was made possible by French arms and ingenuity, by the French fleet and by French engineers experienced in the specialized techniques of siege warfare.

They would also be pleased that Great Britain and the United States have grown close and that these three nations—antagonists on the field of Yorktown—are now leaders of the free world and proponents of the “exalted rights and liberties of human nature.”

But the founders of the Society of the Cincinnati—George Washington, Henry Knox and the other leaders of the Continental army—would not want us to lose sight of what made the Continental army unique and its victory so well worth remembering.

Yorktown was the crowning victory of something new in the world. It was a victory of an army of free men. It was an army made up of citizens rather than subjects. It was an army composed of equals, forged into the irresistible force to uphold the rights and liberties of mankind.

The Revolutionary War occurred at a time when the military arts had risen to a high degree of sophistication. The armies of Great Britain and the German states were highly disciplined, professional forces. Their enlisted men were carefully trained career soldiers led by experienced career officers. Lord Cornwallis and his officers were proud, serious, professional soldiers who dedicated their careers to mastering the complexities of military science. They had practiced their skills on innumerable battlefields. The Americans, largely without any military training or experience, should have been no match for them.

To lead the grandly named Continental army the revolutionary congress chose a Virginia planter named George Washington, a man whose most substantial military experience consisted of leading a small militia regiment in some irregular fighting and frontier duty. Very little in Washington's experience prepared him to lead an army of colonists against the formidable British and Hessian troops.

What Washington knew about leading armies came from observing British generals during the French and Indian War and, like many of the other officers of the Continental army, from books, all of which taught him that rigid discipline, constant drill and strict and unerring subordination and obedience of common soldiers was the foundation of a successful army.

In the first few months of the war, Washington was alternately frustrated and appalled by the problem of creating an army out of the ragged collection of volunteers encamped around Boston. Most of them were

New England men whose manners were alien to Washington. They were, Washington wrote home to his cousin, "an exceedingly dirty and nasty people," undisciplined and disorderly, who seemed to imagine that an army should be run like a town meeting. Backcountry riflemen from Pennsylvania, Maryland and Virginia were more familiar to Washington, but they were proud individualists who were more likely than New Englanders to resist orders.

As the Continental army was tested by adversity ... the very characteristics that had made its men seem ungovernable became the keys to its strength.

On one occasion, riflemen and New Englanders, encamped beside one another, began trading insults. Fistfights broke out and before long the units were engaged in a full-scale battle.

A Massachusetts soldier named Israel Trask reported what happened next. Washington, he said, rode into the mass of soldiers, “leaped from his saddle with the spring of a deer...and rushed into the thickest of the fighting, and with an iron grip seized two tall, savage-looking riflemen by the throat, keeping them at arms length, alternatively shaking and talking to them.” The rioters suddenly stopped fighting and turned to see the commander in action—and then fled, Trask wrote, “at the top of their speed in all directions.”

How, Washington wondered, could he ever make such an unruly mob into an army? At one point he became so depressed that he wished privately that he was living alone in a wigwam somewhere beyond the western frontier.

But Washington gradually came to understand that the army he was called to command reflected the society from which it was drawn. The free people of the American colonies constituted one of the most literate societies in the world. Most colonists were of middling condition, in stark contrast to European nations, where the masses were confined, more or less permanently, to the lower orders of society.

Colonial American society turned easily, almost instinctively, to the principles of equality. Men who had volunteered to serve in the Continental army did not abandon their attachment to liberty when they enlisted.

The kind of severe discipline that was necessary to maintain an army in Europe was the enemy of military discipline and order in America. Free men would not stand for the heavy-handed treatment that was routine in European armies. Within eighteen months of taking command of the Continental army, Washington had learned that he could

not treat free American men the way European officers treated their men.

When the Continental army was on the brink of disintegration in the winter of 1776, Washington appealed to soldiers, whose enlistments were completed, to stay with the army. He appealed to the honor and patriotism of his men.

“My brave fellows,” Washington said, “you have done all that I asked

The soldiers of Washington's army were proud, stubborn, and, at times, undisciplined. But they fought back fiercely.

you to do, and more than could be reasonably expected; but your country is at stake, your wives, your houses, and all that you hold dear. You have worn yourselves out with fatigues and hardships, but we know not how to spare you. If you consent to stay one month longer, you will render that service to the cause of liberty and your country, which you probably can never do under any other circumstances.”

The appeal worked. Most of the men stepped forward.

An officer asked Washington if the men should be enrolled—that is, whether they should be required to sign a muster roll committing themselves to service, a ritual that implied submission to the harsh discipline of army life. “No,” Washington said. “Men who will volunteer in such a case as this need no enrollment to keep them to their duty.”

Something remarkable had happened. A wealthy, polished Virginia aristocrat, a man born into a society that divided men into orders, ranks and degrees from gentry to slaves, was learning to treat an army of New England fishermen, Pennsylvania farm boys and Virginia backwoodsmen as men of honor—as gentlemen not unlike himself.

In doing so Washington and his officers embraced a new definition of a gentleman; a definition they recognized as a moral condition, rather than as a social rank. They also embraced a redefined idea of honor that was no longer connected to rank or status but by adherence to principles of human dignity and decency.

Washington had found a new way to govern an army of free men. No other army in the world operated on such principles. None ever had.

During the long months and years that followed, Washington often reminded his men that they were an army of liberty and freedom, and that their conduct was a test of whether men could be relied on to govern themselves without the lash. He reminded his men that the rights for which they were fighting were the rights of humanity, and that those rights extended even to their enemies.

As the Continental army was tested by adversity and seasoned in battle, the very characteristics that had made its men seem ungovernable became the keys to its strength.

The soldiers of Washington’s army were proud, stubborn and, at times, undisciplined, but also fiercely independent and proudly self-sufficient. They never developed the parade-ground precision of their European counterparts and they sometimes withered under the massed fire of the enemy. But they rallied quickly and fought back fiercely. They marched with surprising speed, often outpacing their opponents.

The Yorktown campaign was their crowning achievement. Rarely in

the history of warfare has an army disengaged from an enemy on one front, then marched with such remarkable speed to engage and compel the surrender of another army hundreds of miles away.

Cornwallis was a brave, capable soldier, one of the most able British generals of his time. But he underestimated the strength, resolve and ability of Washington's army of free men. It cost him, and his country, the war.

The great lesson of our Revolutionary War is that free people, acting in defense of the "exalted rights and liberties of mankind," can achieve anything.

Our opponents have never truly appreciated the strength of a free people. Over and over in the last two hundred years, the tyrants of the world have doubted the resolve of our republic. They have assumed that freedom is inconsistent with military discipline. They have assumed that an army of free men lacks resolve. They have assumed that an army of free men will not persevere. They have assumed that an army of free men lacks the discipline to combat an enemy trained under the whip and driven by fear of punishment. They have assumed that leaders who regard their men as equals will not risk the lives of those men in combat. They have assumed that men who resist surrendering their individuality will not surrender their lives for other men.

The history of our nation testifies to how wrong the enemies of freedom have been.

Americans have demonstrated over and over—at Belleau Wood and in the Argonne Forest, at Iwo Jima and Omaha Beach, and on countless other battlefields—that an army of free men, united in a just cause and empowered by liberty, is more powerful than any army on earth.

That is the lesson of Yorktown. And we must never forget that without the support of the French, the outcome of our revolution may well have been different. Louis XVI sent a great fleet and many brave French soldiers, ably led by Lafayette, de Grasse and Rochambeau. Their dedication to our cause were critical to the victory and established a unique bond between our two countries.

Long live the United States of America and Vive la France.



BRITISH
 FRENCH
 AMERICAN

9 enlevée par les
 le 14 octobre
 12 enlevée par les
 le 14 octobre

Siège d'Yorktown



Cincinnati *Fourteen*

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By Emily L. Schulz

FROM CITIZEN- SOLDIERS TO ONE SOCIETY OF FRIENDS

The History of the Founding of The Society of the Cincinnati

In the spring of 1783, after enduring eight long years of war, the main part of America's Revolutionary army was camped along the Hudson River in New York waiting for word that a peace treaty had been signed. The soldiers—officers and enlisted men alike—had not been paid in months, in some cases longer, and feared being sent home without their pay. Rumors spread that the soldiers would march on Philadelphia to force Congress to pay them or even would try to establish a military dictatorship.

Instead, the officers banded together to form an organization that would honor their fight for independence while providing support for their common struggles. On May 13, 1783, the group was founded and named The Society of the Cincinnati, after the ancient Roman citizen-soldier Cincinnatus. More than 2,200 officers joined the Society and pledged themselves to its principles: commemorating the achievement of American independence, preserving the union of states that resulted, and maintaining the bonds of friendship forged in war.¹ George Washington became the Society's first president general, leading his officers from war to peace.

The Society of the Cincinnati embodies one of the most important legacies of the Revolutionary War—that citizen-soldiers who had left their homes to fight for their country were willing to abandon their swords and support the subordination of military power to civilian rule. Theirs is the story of how an armed revolution gave way to a civilian republic.

The Dissolution of the Army

By the fall of 1782, almost 13,000 Continental soldiers had settled into winter camps along the Hudson River in New York, primarily at Gen. George Washington's headquarters in Newburgh, with others under Maj. Gen. Henry Knox at West Point and Maj. Gen. Friedrich von Steuben in Fishkill. Despite the British surrender at Yorktown one year earlier, the British army still occupied New York City and Charleston, and skirmishes continued in the South and the Caribbean.

The issue of pay that had plagued the American army since 1777 had reached a boiling point. Many officers had not been paid in four years as the treasuries of the Continental Congress and the states ran dry. Officers suggested two solutions: half pay, which would provide each officer with half of his monthly army salary for life; or commutation, which would pay each officer one large lump sum when he left the army. Congress and the states were alternately unable or unwilling to pay for these solutions.



Over the winter of 1782-83 Knox led a failed effort to lobby Congress with petitions, while Maj. Gen. Alexander McDougall of New York and Maj. Gen. Horatio Gates of Virginia conspired to lead the army to mutiny, threatening not to disband until the officers were paid. Washington put an end to the so-called Newburgh Conspiracy with an emotional

Perhaps as early as 1776 Henry Knox envisioned a hereditary society of Continental army officers whose membership would pass to their eldest male heirs.

Engraving of Henry Knox by Thomas Phillibrown after Alonzo Chappel. New York: Johnson, Fry & Co., 1857. Collections of The Society of the Cincinnati.

appeal to the officers for patience and loyalty, ending with his admission, "I have grown gray in your service and now find myself growing blind."² On March 22, 1783, Congress approved commutation, which the officers soon accepted.

The officers banded together to form an organization that would honor their fight for independence while providing support for their common struggles.

The Society Is Born

News of a formal cessation of hostilities reached the main army on April 16, 1783. One day earlier, Knox had finished drafting a constitution for a national society of officers that would maintain their fellowship

and protect their common interests after they returned home. Knox, a thirty-three-year-old bookseller from Boston who commanded the Continental artillery, had thought of creating such a society perhaps as early as 1776. The near mutiny of the soldiers and the looming dissolution of the army pushed Knox to introduce his plan to his fellow officers.

Knox envisioned a hereditary society of American officers of the Continental army whose membership would pass to their eldest male heirs. In addition to preserving the memory of the Revolution, the society would establish treasuries to support veterans and their families. The group would be organized into state branches that would take charge of admitting members and dispensing charitable funds. Knox called the organization "the Cincinnati" after the ancient Roman hero Cincinnatus, who embodied the citizen-soldier ideal.

To organize the society Knox relied on Brig. Gen. Jedediah Huntington, his second in command at West Point, and Major General Steuben to circulate copies of his draft. On May 13 the general officers and representatives of the state regiments gathered at Steuben's headquarters and formally established the group, named The Society of the Cincinnati. The meeting directed that the Society's constitution, named the Institution, be inscribed on parchment and taken to Washington for his signature "at the head of it."³ The signatures of thirty-five fellow officers follow his.

The Institution ultimately created a multi-national organization, including officers from both the American and French forces in

recognition of the alliance that had helped to win the war. The document also directed its members to be active citizens of the new nation, because, as Washington later said, “the glory of soldiers cannot be completed without acting well the part of citizens.”⁴ The nation would soon learn of the Society’s founding, as newspapers first printed the text of the Institution in September 1783.⁵

Who Were the Original Members?

Nearly 40% of the officers—more than 2,200 men—joined the Society as members of the fourteen constituent societies, established in each of the original thirteen states and in France following the founding of the Society. This number includes naval as well as army officers and honorary members.

Officers joined the Society for many reasons. Some were attracted to the potential the Society had to help the soldiers, either by political change or charitable giving. Others sought the fellowship that they had forged during the war. Still others believed in its legacy to future generations and wanted to be remembered as soldiers of the Revolution. For Col. Michael Jackson of Newton, Mass., joining the Society was a family affair, as he and his five sons all became original members of the Massachusetts Society.⁶

The Society sparked a national controversy just months after its founding.

After the war, many of the original members returned home to modest lives with their

families. They became merchants, innkeepers, doctors, carpenters and farmers. Some continued their military service in local militias or the national army or navy. Some excelled in the fields of law, banking and state and local politics. Only a few members advanced to high political office, including Lt. Benjamin Pierce as governor of New Hampshire, Maj. Gen. Henry Knox as secretary of war, and Maj. James Monroe as president of the United States.

Less prominent members of the Society include Capt. David Bushnell of the Connecticut Society, who invented the submarine, dubbed the “Turtle,” in the early 1770s, although its first missions had little success. Maj. Isaac Craig of the Pennsylvania Society helped establish the first

glass factory in Pittsburgh in 1797. Capt. Johann Christian Senf, a Hessian soldier who defected to the American side during the war, joined the South Carolina Society and became the engineer in charge of the building of the Santee Canal.

The last surviving original member of the Society, Maj. Robert Burnet of New York, was also the last surviving Revolutionary War officer. In 1854 he died at the age of ninety-two in Newburgh. Burnet was remembered several years after his death as one of the “honored living witnesses of the prowess of those who wrestled successfully for freedom.”⁷



Pierre-Charles L'Enfant finished his drawings for the eagle, the Society's insignia, over the summer of 1783.

Collections of The Society of the Cincinnati.

Symbols of the Society

To identify original members of the Society, Maj. Pierre Charles L'Enfant created several marks of membership that became artistic expressions of the achievement of American independence. L'Enfant had joined the Continental army after leaving the Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture in Paris in 1776. The Frenchman served with the Corps of Engineers through the end of the war, having been wounded at Savannah and taken prisoner at Charleston. L'Enfant became an original member of the Society and chose to remain in the United States after the war. He is perhaps best remembered for planning the capital city of Washington.

The order of the Society, commonly called the eagle, is described in the Institution as a gold medal bearing images of Cincinnatus on both sides and suspended from a ribbon of blue and white, colors “descriptive of the union of France and America” in the war against Britain. L'Enfant



The Verplanck House, also known as Mount Gulian, in Newburgh, N.Y., the site of the Society's founding.

Collections of The Society of the Cincinnati.

The last surviving original member of the Society, Maj. Robert Burnet of New York, died in 1854 at the age of ninety-two.

Engraving on wood by Benson J. Lossing, after a daguerreotype. Published in Lossing, *The Pictorial Field-Book of the Revolution* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1859), vol. I.



finished his drawings for the eagle over the summer of 1783 and oversaw production of the first eagles in Paris in early 1784. At the same time, he completed a sketch for a parchment membership certificate, known as the diploma, as well as designs for a silver medal intended as a third emblem of membership but never struck. L'Enfant emblazoned the diploma with patriotic iconography and had it engraved on a copperplate. Later in 1784 Capt. Samuel Shaw of the Massachusetts Society sailed to China with L'Enfant's design for the eagle to have it reproduced on porcelain dinnerware. The first sets of Cincinnati china arrived in Baltimore in 1785.

Finding Its Place in the New Nation

The Society sparked a national controversy just months after its founding, being criticized by Aedanus Burke, Thomas Jefferson and others for attempting to establish an American aristocracy. Several states considered barring members of the Society from holding public office, fearing that they secretly wished to control the American government and treasury and suspicious of the foreign influences that could result from an organization made up of both Americans and Frenchmen. Even the Society's leader, George Washington, threatened to resign his office over the controversy.

Although individual members of the Society became prominent in the new American government, the Society as a whole never aimed for political power. But some Society members did become conspicuous in government, such as Washington, Alexander Hamilton, Timothy Pickering and James Monroe, as well as those who sat together at the convening of the Continental Congress in Princeton in September 1783—the first time that Society members had been seen together publicly. In addition, eleven of the thirty-nine signers of the Constitution—nearly one third—and almost one quarter of the members of the first federal Congress (1789-91) were members of the Society.

One national issue that the Society's members and constituent branches continued to push was securing compensation for the soldiers of the Revolution. The commutation to which the officers in Newburgh had agreed in 1783 only provided them with five years of pay, and most enlisted men had never received their back pay. Although several states approved land grants and other compensation for their Revolutionary War soldiers in the 1780s and 1790s, the federal government did not make pensions available to impoverished veterans until 1818 and to all veterans, or their widows, until 1832, nearly fifty years after the end of the war.

Emily Schulz is deputy director and curator of The Society of the Cincinnati.

1 Sources differ on the exact number of original members of the Society. Bryce Metcalf included 2,269 in his count in 1938, while Minor Myers, jr., counted 2,270 in 1983, including one more original member of the North Carolina Society than Metcalf had. It should be noted that the number printed in Myers is incorrectly added and actually totals 2,270 not the printed total of 2,403. Bryce Metcalf, *Original Members and Other Officers Eligible to the Society of the Cincinnati, 1783-1938* (Strasburg, Va.: Shenandoah Publishing House, Inc., 1938), 360; Minor Myers, jr., *Liberty without Anarchy: A History of the Society of the Cincinnati*, rev. ed. (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2004), 123.

2 Samuel Shaw, *The Journals of Major Samuel Shaw, the First American Consul at Canton* (Boston: Wm. Crosby and H. P. Nichols, 1847), 104.

3 Myers, *Liberty without Anarchy*, 27.

4 George Washington, Philadelphia, Circular letter, 15 May 1784, The Society of the Cincinnati Archives.

5 Myers, *Liberty without Anarchy*, 66.

6 James Archer O'Reilly III, *Memorials of the Massachusetts Society of the Cincinnati* (Boston: Published by the Society, 2004), 194-206.

7 Benson J. Lossing, *The Pictorial Field-Book of the Revolution*, Vol. 1 (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1859), 686.



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“OUR ALLIES ALONE HAVE SAVED THE SOCIETY”

By Jay Wayne Jackson (Conn.)

Henry Knox wrote the chevalier de Chastellux, the vicomte de Noailles and the marquis de Lafayette to inform them that the Society had been established and that the founders had taken the liberty to associate all the generals and colonels of the French army.

Engraving of Henry Knox by John Francis Eugene Prud'homme after Gilbert Stuart. New York: James Herring, ca.1834. Collections of The Society of the Cincinnati.

As we celebrate the 225th anniversary of the birth of The Society of the Cincinnati, we must not forget that we owe two tremendous debts of gratitude to the French. First, of course, as our allies in our war for independence, the French helped secure our victory. Secondly, in the critical early years of the Society, as it faced condemnation from its critics, the enthusiasm of the French allayed the outcry and helped save the Society from possible dissolution. George Washington's leadership was also crucial during these years.

From the very beginning of our war for independence, King Louis XVI authorized the count de Vergennes to send money, cannons, muskets, gunpowder and other war material to the colonists. After the battle of Saratoga and the signing of the Treaty of Paris in February 1778, the French sent army and naval forces under the command of the count de Rochambeau and the count de Grasse. This great effort culminated in the magnificent victory at Yorktown that secured our independence.

Our founders recognized this great debt when they inserted the following into our Institution:

The society, deeply impressed with a sense of the generous assistance this country has received from France, and desirous of perpetuating the friendships which have been formed, and so happily subsisted, between the officers of the allied forces in the prosecution of the war, direct that the President General transmit, as soon as may be, to each of the characters hereafter named, a medal containing the order of the Society, viz.: His Excellency, the Chevalier de la Luzerne, Minister Plenipotentiary His Excellency, the Sieur Gerard, late Minister Plenipotentiary Their Excellencies, the Comte d'Estaing, the Comte de Grasse, The Comte de Barras, The Chevalier des Touches, Admirals and Commanders in the Navy, His Excellency the Comte de Rochambeau, Commander in Chief, and the generals and colonels of his army, and acquaint them, that the society does itself the honor to consider them members.

The Institution also provided that “The Society shall have an Order, by which its members shall be known and distinguished, which shall be a medal of gold, of a proper size to receive the emblems, and suspended by a deep blue riband two inches wide, edged with white, descriptive of the union of France and America.”

Henry Knox then wrote the chevalier de Chastellux, the vicomte de Noailles and the marquis de Lafayette to inform them that the Society had been established and that the founders had taken the liberty to associate all the generals and colonels of the French army. “Our esteem for France will be perpetual,” he wrote.

One hundred and thirty-four years later at the North Carolina triennial meeting held in May 1917, similar sentiments were expressed when the following motion was adopted unanimously: “Remembering that it was the aid of France that made the United States a nation, we welcome the opportunity to repay the debt which was then incurred and to help a people who we love and admire.” That same meeting elected Marshal Joseph Jacques Joffre, the first honorary member of the General Society. Marshal Ferdinand Foch was made an honorary member of the General Society at the 1920 Triennial, and, in 1976, the president of France, Valéry Giscard d’Estaing, became the third Frenchman elected to honorary membership in the General Society. It is thus most appropriate that the first three of only four honorary General Society members were all French.

The second great debt is that The Society of the Cincinnati owes its existence to its original French members. Why can we say this? After our Society was established on the banks of the Hudson on May 13, 1783, it took only a few months before the hereditary and other provisions in the Institution caused a violent reaction. Judge Aedanus Burke “indicted the Society as a nascent nobility” which would cause the American experiment in republican government to fail. He argued that this nobility would see it their duty as patricians to govern the ignorant plebians, and he urged state legislatures to adopt “spirited Resolutions” against the Society. Other writers predicted that the Society, unchecked, would overthrow the republic and that it was nothing but the “brat of despotism.” In Connecticut, delegates to a convention worried that a “new and strange order of men had arisen under the eye of congress, thinking themselves the only saviors of the republic and assuming badges of peerage.” John Jay wrote, “Some of our best Friends think the order of

Cincinnatus will eventually divide us into two mighty factions.” John Adams said that the Society was the “first step taken to deface the beauty of our temple of liberty” and that it was the “deepest piece of cunning yet attempted.” Benjamin Franklin called the founding of a hereditary society “an absurdity.” Many others, most of whom were not eligible for membership because they had not served in the army or navy, were also extremely critical of the new society. Among these was Thomas Jefferson, who urged Washington to “disassociate himself from the organization completely.” He actively lobbied Washington to abolish the Society, saying that the “Society clouded the distinction between civil and military, the prime component of his idea of free government.”

It was evident to Washington that they could not disband the Society that such distinguished French leaders had joined.

Washington was aware of and very concerned about these violent attacks when, on his way to Philadelphia in May 1784 for a meeting of the Society, he stopped to see Jefferson in Annapolis. According to Jefferson’s later recollection of the meeting, Washington was upset about the criticism and told him that if the critics were right, the Society ought to be dissolved. “If the thing be bad,” Jefferson recalled Washington saying, “it must be totally abolished.”

However, at the meeting, Washington decided that the best course of action to diffuse the strident public outcry was to suggest amendments that would eliminate the hereditary provisions and remove any reference to politics. Abolition of the Society, Washington had concluded, was unnecessary. It would also be imprudent, he realized, because of the “very distinguished foreigners in this institution.” The arrival of Pierre L’Enfant with the news that King Louis XVI had made himself patron of the Order and was permitting his officers to wear the Cincinnati eagle at court tipped the balance. With the French enthusiastically joining the Society, “Abolition would be an insult to America’s allies in victory.”

L’Enfant also brought with him the new gold eagles that he had had made in Paris—and which were happily received by the delegates—as well as a magnificent diamond eagle, which was inscribed, “Donated in the name of French sailors to his Excellency the General Washington.” This caused Washington to write d’Estaing that he was “inexpressively honored by that most respectable Body of men, the French Navy.”

After the meeting Washington, on his way home to Mount Vernon, stopped at Annapolis, where he told Jefferson what had occurred. According to Jefferson, Washington affirmed that he had gone to Philadelphia intending to have the entire Society abolished but that the arrival of Pierre L'Enfant with the eagles and the news about the French members had changed everything. The best he could do was to have some amendments passed. This seemed to placate Jefferson and most of

*The fellowship
that Knox envisioned
has shown no signs
of abating.*

the critics who thought the hereditary and political provisions had been eliminated. Whether Washington had actually gone to Philadelphia intending to secure the abolition of the Society, as Jefferson maintained, is not at all clear.

Whether he even intended the amendments adopted in Philadelphia to be ratified is equally uncertain. Washington was well aware that the amendments would have to be ratified by every constituent society, just as amendments to the Articles of Confederation required the ratification of every state, something that experience had proved was almost impossible to achieve.

In fact, after leaving Philadelphia, the delegates went back to their respective states where the amendments met with mixed reactions. Several states endorsed the changes, but many did not. In my own state of Connecticut, the Connecticut Society met on July 7, 1784, and quietly tabled the motion to adopt the recommended changes. These divergent actions created an uncertainty about whether or not the amendments would be enforced that lasted until after Washington's death. Members were still in mourning for him when a special general meeting was held on May 5, 1800, in Philadelphia, where delegates from eight states decided that the silence of the constituent societies indicated their disapproval of the amended Institution. They then voted "that the institution of the Society of the Cincinnati remains as it was originally proposed and adopted by the officers of the American Army." By that time, the controversy over the Society sparked by Aedanus Burke was long forgotten.

Washington's role in the Society was crucial. While he was not active in its formation, he approved what Knox was proposing and agreed to be the first president general. This legitimized the Society in the minds of the officers and gave them hope that equity would prevail on the issues,

including back pay, then outstanding with Congress. Also, in response to the public outcry in the spring of 1784, Washington's leadership insured that the Society remained intact by accepting the amended Institution. While there is no direct evidence, it is possible that Washington, while professing that he was in favor of amendments, maneuvered events so that the status of the amended Institution remained so ambiguous that it did not upset its members or its critics. The Society had helped ward off unwise action by the army in 1783, and Washington, until his death, was able by skillful diplomacy to keep both the Society and the nation quiet.

Maj. James Fairlie, who had voted against the amendments in Philadelphia, wrote Washington's aide, Lt. Col. Benjamin Walker, complaining about what had been adopted at the meeting. Because he was aware of the effect of L'Enfant's arrival and the commitment of the French to the Society, Walker answered him saying, "Our allies alone have saved the Society."

For a more complete description of what happened before, during and after the Philadelphia meeting, I strongly recommend a careful reading of *Liberty Without Anarchy*, Minor Myers jr.'s informative book about the Cincinnati, from which I have drawn quotations and leaned heavily upon. In it, Minor makes abundantly clear that we probably would not be celebrating our 225th anniversary if it had not been for the actions of King Louis XVI and the French army and navy officers who enthusiastically supported the Society. It was evident to Washington and his fellow officers that whatever else they did, they could not disband the Society that such distinguished French leaders had joined.

As events have unfolded it is fortuitous that the hereditary provision was not repealed because the bond between American and French Cincinnati has helped cement the alliance of two principal republics of the free world. The fellowship that Knox envisioned has shown no signs of abating as friendships have passed from family to family over many generations. Our One Society of Friends has been perpetuated, and Knox's prediction that "our esteem for France will be perpetual" has been realized. The Society continues to commit itself, with increasing dedication, to promoting the memory of the American Revolution and the heroic French and Americans who secured American independence.

Jay Jackson, who served as president general of The Society of the Cincinnati from 2001 to 2004, is the collateral representative of First Lieutenant Nathaniel Morgan, Ward's Connecticut State Regiment (died in service).

The seal of the Society of the Cincinnati is centered on the page. It features an eagle with spread wings, perched on a shield. The shield contains a smaller shield with a ship and a plow. The eagle is surrounded by a wreath. Below the eagle is the year '1783'.

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THE FOUNDING FATHERS *and* THE SOCIETY *of* THE CINCINNATI



“Washington’s Farewell to His Officers”—Washington accepted the office of president general to support the claims of his long-suffering officers and to perpetuate their mutual affection. SOC



*by Kenneth Russell Bowling,
The George Washington University*

*The following lecture was presented
at the Symposium on the Founding of
The Society of the Cincinnati held
at the auditorium of The Phillips
Collection on September 19, 2008,
as part of the three-day convocation
celebrating the society's 225th
anniversary.*

Oh to be an American on 13 May 1783! The nations of Europe had just recognized the independence of the United States and agreed to territorial boundaries that made it larger than any of them. Margaret Beekman Livingston, a leader of Hudson River society, spoke for many of her fellow citizens when she envisioned America rising into a great empire and being the land of liberty.

Not everyone was so optimistic. The officers of the Continental Army, who had done so much to make the United States a reality, had every reason to be concerned. Without a war they expected to be forgotten by a country that feared standing armies and had only begrudgingly promised them half pay for life and then collapsed that into full pay for seven years. The government making the promise had no source of revenue except requests to the states which they could ignore.

Perhaps the officers would receive nothing. They were restive and some threatened to involve themselves in federal politics, to refuse to disband without their promised pay, to mutiny, or even to challenge George Washington's moderate leadership. But Washington's strong commitment to civilian control of the military prevailed. The concept would be his most important contribution to the American Constitution.

It was in this context that The Society of the Cincinnati came into being on May 13, 1783. The idea first occurred to the former bookseller Henry Knox, the hero of the siege of Boston. Knox had the enthusiastic backing of several officers, including two foreign born ones soon to become American citizens, Frederick William Steuben and Peter Charles Enfant. Both men had Americanized their names, but they were still attached to military orders of the sort familiar in Europe. The society's purposes were fraternity, charity, and lobbying for veterans not just for monetary benefits, but also for a stronger federal government by promoting and cherishing "that union and national honor so essential to the happiness of the states and the future dignity of the American empire."

Named after the Roman general Cincinnatus who, rather than take over the Republic after a successful military campaign, retired to his farm, the society was organized into thirteen chapters that came together in a Triennial meeting every three years. A chapter was also established in France. Membership descended to the oldest son, a practice known as primogeniture that had been abolished in the property law of the United States by the new state constitutions.

In the worst political mistake of his life, George Washington accepted the presidency of the society, the only national political organization in the United States other than Congress. Why did a man so politically astute and so deeply concerned with his historical reputation make such a mistake? I believe it happened because his finely focused political eye was blinded by his desire to do something for his long suffering officers in the wake of his years of insistence that they buckle under to civilian leadership.

Many members of the vocal radical wing of the patriot movement believed the society threatened such revolutionary goals as liberty and state supremacy by promoting aristocracy and a stronger federal government. Aedanus Burke, a South Carolina judge, spoke out first. His *Considerations on the Order or Society of the Cincinnati* was published in Charleston in October 1783 and reprinted at Boston, Newport,

Hartford, New Haven, New York, and Philadelphia, as well as in Europe. Markus Huenemörder, the most recent historian to study the society, compared the pamphlet to Thomas Paine's *Common Sense*, in that it had a similar effect in rallying Americans to a cause. Burke described the Cincinnati as a "Baneful Weed"—a nascent nobility that would doom the American experiment in republican government by dividing the country into aristocrats and rabble.

The Continental officers were real heroes, but who knew what to expect from their descendants? Elbridge Gerry of Massachusetts proved a more aggressive and long-term critic because he served both in Congress and the Convention that wrote the federal Constitution. He viewed the society, which he labeled variously as a "Political Monster Brat of Despotism," as a counter force to Congress and a threat to states rights.

Critics called the society a nascent nobility that would doom the American experiment in republican government.

For Gerry the existence of the society implied that its members should have all the merit of effecting the Revolution despite the fact that most did not participate in the early opposition to the British ministry and did not face death as traitors like the civilian leadership. The purpose of the first general meeting of the society in 1784, he believed, was to form a plan for strengthening the federal government at the expense of the states and to provide it with three branches instead of just a legislature. Cincinnati would carry the plan from the general meeting to the state chapters, which would work to elect state legislators pledged to a stronger federal government, who in turn would elect congressmen similarly pledged.

The society, Gerry was convinced, would eventually control the United States Treasury and other parts of the federal government. He doubted that George Washington could stop its drive of the society towards aristocracy and monarchy even if he wanted. In any case, Washington presided over an organization of members attached to his person by every tie of friendship and who for a long time had been subject to his nod. He had publicly supported a stronger federal government and, with the assistance of the society, might attempt it. Who will answer for the patriotism of any man when a crown is in view? In 1797 Gerry reflected that as president of the United States Washington had relied too much on the Cincinnati.

Gerry's Massachusetts allies and dear friends, Mercy Otis Warren and her husband James, also criticized the society even though their son wore its Eagle. As a counter force for advocating republican principles, James Warren proposed that Gerry accept the presidency of a Society of Sydney,



Kenneth Bowling takes questions at the symposium on the founding of The Society of the Cincinnati on September 19.

named after the seventeenth-century English exponent of liberty and republicanism, Algernon Sydney. John Quincy Adams considered the society dangerous if not fatal to the Constitution. Edmund Randolph of Virginia, later the first attorney general of the United States, admitted to James Madison that The Society of the Cincinnati had a truly laudable purpose, despite the fact that it kept alive the distinction between civilian and soldier, but he feared it might become harmful in the future.

The American diplomats in Europe all expressed their concern, worrying, as John Jay reported, that the society would divide the United

States into two political factions. The Marquis de Lafayette, whose activities in France earned him an honorary place in that diplomatic corps, objected to the hereditary nature of the society despite his membership in it. John Adams considered the creation of the society the first step taken to deface our temple of liberty and the "deepest piece of cunning yet."

Benjamin Franklin, the only real democrat among the founders, had the most to say. He saw the idea of an hereditary society in the United States as absurd and could not resist applying his wit: a father is only half responsible for his son, one quarter for his grandson and in nine generations one five hundredth. Cincinnati, he proposed, should follow the Chinese precedent and give their Eagles and ribbons not to their sons but to their parents. "I hope therefore," he concluded, "that the Order will drop that part of their project, and content themselves with a life enjoyment of their little badge . . . and let the distinction die with those who have merited it."

Five years later Franklin accepted honorary membership in the society.

Other important civilian leaders so honored were John Dickinson, the first hero of the Revolution; Robert Morris, in effect the first secretary of the treasury and a great friend to the Continental Army; Elias Boudinot, the commissary of American military prisoners; and Gouverneur Morris, wordsmith of the federal Constitution.

The two most effective critics of the society were George Washington and Thomas Jefferson. Washington quickly realized that he had made a political mistake by accepting its presidency and in April 1784, before going to Philadelphia for the first annual meeting, sought Jefferson's frank and full opinion of the society and also that of Congress in which his fellow Virginian served.

During the 1780s Jefferson could masterfully push Washington's buttons, and his response convinced the former commander-in-chief that he must make his concerns known to the society. Jefferson opened his reply by admitting that Washington's connection with the Cincinnati had been a matter of anxiety to him because he did not wish to see future Americans inherit a compromised image of the leader of their Revolution.

The moderation and virtue of a single individual, Jefferson acknowledged, had probably prevented it from being closed, as most others had, by military subversion of that liberty it intended to establish; but that individual is not immortal and his successors at the head of the Cincinnati might adopt a different and mistaken road to glory. Jefferson understood the natural longing of men who had shared so many scenes of hardship and danger and had become dear to one another to seek a way to come together socially from time to time.

Jefferson contended that the society had no place in the United States for three reasons. First, the foundation of all the American constitutions was the natural equality of man and the denial of every preeminence in society except legal office, "particularly preeminence by birth." Second, inducting honorary members would bring together all the men of talents and wealth in the United States, thereby allowing the Cincinnati to infiltrate and then take control of the federal government. Third, European courts might gain influence in American affairs through the foreign members.

Jefferson had no suspicions that society members foresaw, much less intended, these mischiefs, and perhaps the concern he and others expressed were only the forebodings of politicians. Congress, Jefferson

concluded, had taken no position about the society and would not unless forced to do so by the states; if forced, its response would be unfriendly.

En route to Philadelphia Washington stopped at Annapolis, then the seat of Congress, where he had a long conversation with Jefferson about the matter. Both Jefferson and Congressman Elbridge Gerry believed that Washington left Annapolis with the intention of recommending self-abolition of the society.

If that was his intention, Washington changed his mind after Peter Enfant arrived from France with gorgeous eagle medals for all the members and the news that Louis XVI had graciously allowed French officers to join the society. Abolition after that would be seen as an insult to America's ally France. Instead Washington proposed and warmly advocated seven amendments to the Institution, most importantly the absolute total abolition of the hereditary provision, the national convention, future honorary memberships, and every word, sentence, and clause which has a political tendency.

Whatever Washington dictated, the members obeyed, according to one who voted against the changes; another concluded that only Louis XVI had saved the society from extinction. Washington signed a public circular letter to the state chapters calling on them to ratify the amendments, and then returned to Annapolis to explain to Jefferson and others what the society had done. By the end of 1784 eight state chapters had ratified and serious public criticism of the society evaporated. George Washington—not Louis XVI—had saved The Society of the Cincinnati.

Not all the members supported the amendments, many believing Washington to be more concerned with his personal reputation than with the society. Most particularly, Alexander Hamilton who, in a precursor to his battle with Jefferson for Washington's mind in the early 1790s, successfully fought the changes, even the hereditary provision that he himself opposed. It proved an easy task because the society's Institution, like the Articles of Confederation, required unanimous agreement to any amendment. The Connecticut chapter tabled the matter; New Hampshire voted no; and, led by Hamilton, the New York chapter proposed fifteen modifications of the amendments for consideration at a triennial convention.

Washington became livid when Hamilton informed him of New York's action, responding that if the society meant to live in peace with its fellow citizens it must accept the 1784 amendments. At the 1787

Triennial Meeting, George Turner, an attendee, opined, “Entre nous I could almost wish for Washington’s absence for he may cool our plans with a few drops if not a torrent of cold water; let us never lose sight of the liberties of the people but let us remember that energetic [federal] government is essential to their security.” The Triennial referred the issue to a special 1788 national meeting that did not obtain a quorum, and the society remains a hereditary institution to this day.

Washington allowed himself to believe that the amendments would be adopted eventually. Consequently, he was far less sympathetic to Jefferson concerns when the ambassador reported from France that he had heard no European mention the society “even as reformed by the Amendments that he and many others assumed ratified” who did not consider it dishonorable and destructive to American government. Jefferson furthermore observed that he accepted the European view that the day might be distant, but if a single fiber were left of the society it would produce an hereditary aristocracy that would “change our governments from the best to the worst in the world.” Hopefully, he concluded, the Cincinnati would eradicate itself, recognizing that only mischief could come from its existence.

By 1794 Jefferson had lost faith that Washington would do anything about the society. How odd, he complained to James Madison, that Washington as president of the United States condemned as self-created the newly formed democratic societies whose principles promoted republican government. How does Washington compare them with The Society of the Cincinnati that meets secretly all over the Union, creates a hereditary distinction in the United States, and is the self-created organization whose members are the very persons denouncing the democratic societies?

The Cincinnati was not without proponents. At least two anonymous pamphlets defended it against Burke’s original charges, which the artist John Trumbull, a society member, considered nothing more than lies and propaganda. Henry Knox believed the society he founded to be the only bar against anarchy in the United States. The author Judith Sargeant Murray, who hoped it endured as long as nature itself, penned a poem hailing it as the guard of the Union. Unexpected support came from Thomas Paine who, while acknowledging the society’s ant-republican nature, concluded that commemorating the example of the Continental Army officers retiring to private life rather than taking over the

government was more valuable to the survival of the republic than abolishing the society.

Thomas Rodney, a Delaware judge and legislator, adored the society to the point of claiming responsibility for its creation, alleging to have proposed the idea to General Horatio Gates in 1781 as necessary to preserve the Union and to reform the government. The Cincinnati, he argued, had relinquished its hereditary membership immediately upon realizing the preposterousness of making a reward of merit hereditary when it might descend to a fool or a knave. Rodney wished to see the United States ever blessed with an aristocracy founded on meritorious service to the country, “for savage indeed must be that country where age, experience, wisdom, and merit meets with no peculiar respect.” Where no exclusive privilege or power is conveyed by the mark of merit, he asked, where can the danger be?

In the early 1790s, Rodney called for the society to come forward in support of republican France and the United States against the despots of Europe. Had the members forgotten their principles or were they too shamed by Aedanus Burke? Rodney compared the society’s nemesis to a little child, who while out playing saw a very dark cloud full of thunder and lightning and rushed to spread the alarm. The adults agreed that it appeared very frightful indeed. But the cloud passed over leaving a clear sky and purified air in its wake.

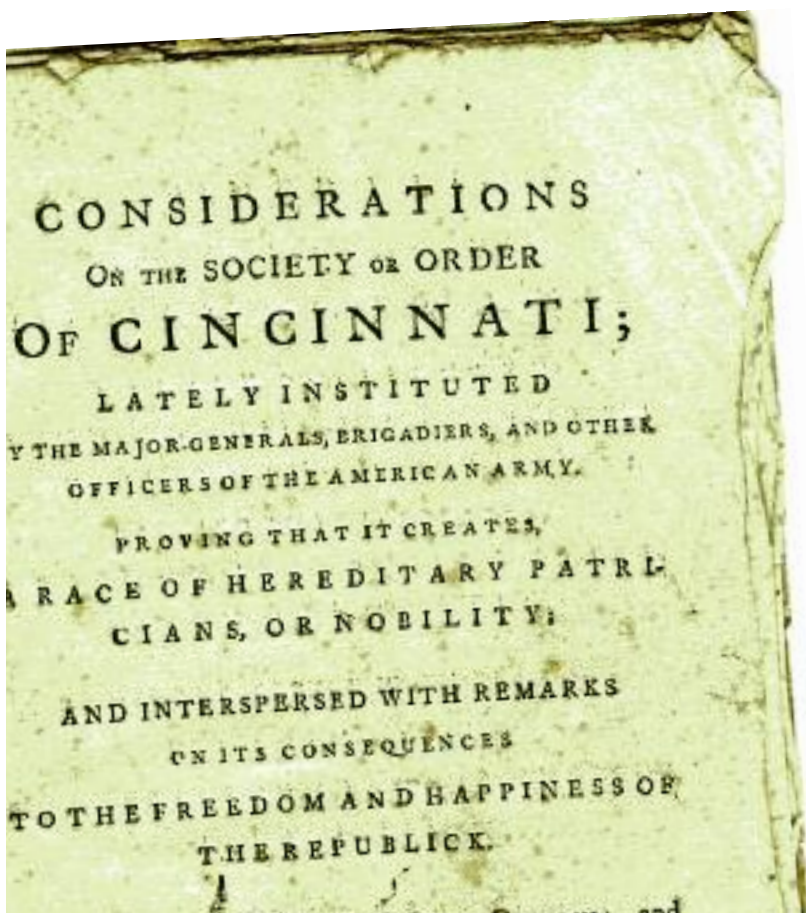
In 1787 the Federal Convention proposed a new Constitution for the United States. Thirty-eight percent of its fifty-five delegates belonged to the society at a time when its members composed less than one-tenth of one percent of the population at large. Cincinnati at the Convention overwhelmingly favored strengthening the federal government and the new Constitution. Long time critic Elbridge Gerry also served in the Convention and expressed fears that a purely popular election of the president of the United States would throw the choice into the hands of the society, and he joined those advocating for presidential electors as did George Mason of Virginia, who shared the same concern.

The original printing of Aedanus Burke's 1783 pamphlet attacking the society is one of the greatest rarities in the Society's library collection. SOC

While some Cincinnati, most prominently George Clinton of New York, opposed ratification of the Constitution, most strongly and often vocally supported it, although the society's annual letter in 1788 carefully avoided the subject. The hyperbolic and always quotable social reformer and Philadelphia doctor Benjamin Rush believed that if reason did not bring about ratification, force would, because all the wealth of the country as well as the military men of The Society of the Cincinnati favored it.

Opponents of ratification occasionally expressed concern that the Cincinnati would have too much influence in the new government, but only once did criticism border on the kind heard during the winter of 1783. A Philadelphia newspaper writer made the accusation that the Constitution was a "deep laid scheme to enslave us . . . probably invented in the society of the cincinnati."

Aedanus Burke, along with fellow critics Elbridge Gerry and the Warrens, opposed the Constitution and remained convinced that the



society was deeply involved in its adoption. When Burke sent out a questionnaire to gather information for a history of ratification he asked: What role during the Federal Convention and the ratification campaign did the society play?

The absence of serious criticism of the Cincinnati during the year long debate over the ratification of the Constitution indicates the degree to which Washington had been successful in removing the Cincinnati from the national political agenda. Indeed, by the time Congress called for elections to the First Federal Congress in 1788, Washington could no longer be numbered among the society's critics.

Washington had been successful in removing the Cincinnati from the national political agenda

In a very revealing letter written that fall, Washington commented at great length about what he conceived to have been a most unreasonable prejudice against the society.

"I was conscious," he explained, "that my own proceedings on that subject were immaculate. I was also convinced, that the members, actuated by motives of sensibility, charity, and patriotism, were doing a laudable thing, in

erecting that memorial of their common services, sufferings, and friendships; and I had not the most remote suspicion, that our conduct therein would have been unprofitable, or unpleasing, to our countrymen. Yet have we been virulently traduced, as to our designs; and I have not even escaped being represented as short-sighted in not foreseeing the consequences, or wanting in patriotism for not discouraging an establishment calculated to create distinctions in society, and subvert the principles of a republican government. Indeed, the phantom seems now to be pretty well laid; except on certain occasions, when it is conjured up by designing men to work their own purposes upon terrified imaginations. You will recollect there have not been wanting, in the late political discussions [over the Constitution], those, who were hardy enough to assert, the proposed general government was the wicked and traitorous fabrication of the Cincinnati."

Interestingly, when Washington became president of the United States soon after writing this letter, he resigned the presidency of The Potowmack Navigation Company because of a possible conflict of interest; however, he remained president of The Society of the Cincinnati until his death in 1799.

Between 1789 and 1791 the First Federal Congress implemented the Constitution. It met in a building renovated by the American Continental Army officer and society member Peter Charles Enfant, whom an overly imaginative critic accused of crowning the building with the Cincinnati Eagle. Twenty-five percent of the ninety-five members of the new Congress were Cincinnati.

Senator William Maclay of Pennsylvania saw the society as a major force in national politics that lobbied for federal jobs for its members and promoted the fiscal policy of its “leader,” Secretary of the Treasury Alexander Hamilton. However Maclay was not above citing the society’s wisdom when it served his purpose: an advocate of moving the federal government to Philadelphia in 1789 and 1790, he noted that the society had always had the good sense to hold its Triennial Meetings there. Maclay recorded vivid descriptions of two members of the First Congress definitely not Cincinnati. He found Elbridge Gerry to be “a tedious & most disagreeable Speaker” whose appearance was “at all times far from Pleasing.” He thought Aedanus Burke too recent a convert to republican principles to be trusted until he learned upon examination that “this is the same Man Who wrote against the Cincinnati.”

More than other historians of the society, I believe the Cincinnati had a very important influence during the constitutional revolution that took place in the United States between 1787 and 1791. Burke, Gerry, Jefferson, and other states rights advocates had been correct in their predictions. There was no conspiracy, however, just well organized American citizens expressing their strong political convictions. On the other hand, the fear of aristocracy has proven to be groundless; the society’s membership is diverse, including men who make their living administering libraries or writing popular fiction. And, in conclusion, my favorite example: in 1966 the director of Anderson House flagged a cab in downtown Washington, giving the driver detailed directions to the society’s headquarters, to which the cabbie replied “Sir, I know where the House is. I am a member of the society.”

Kenneth Bowling is co-editor of The Documentary History of the First Federal Congress and widely recognized as an authority on the founding of the federal city. Dr. Bowling dedicates this article to John D. Kilbourne (Md.), supervisor at the Maryland Historical Society in 1960 and, as Dr. Bowling described him, “the man who did so much to make The Society of the Cincinnati library so magnificent.”

The seal of the Society of the Cincinnati is centered in the background. It features an eagle with wings spread, perched on a shield. The shield contains a smaller shield with a ship and a plow. The eagle is surrounded by a wreath. The text "SOCIETY OF THE CINCINNATI" is inscribed around the eagle's head.

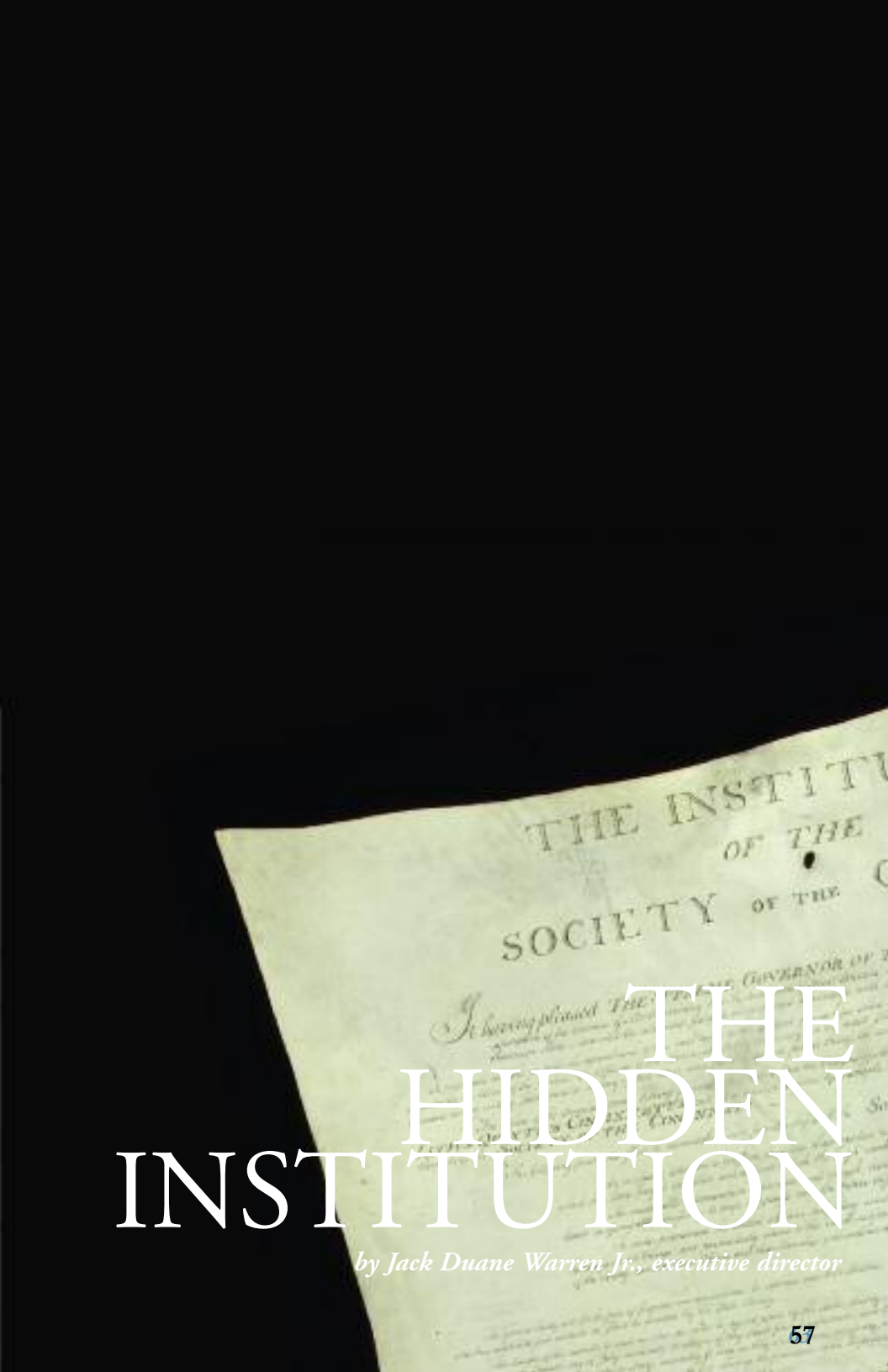
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The background of the page is a dark, textured surface. In the lower right, there is a tilted, aged document. The document's header reads "THE INSTITUTE OF THE SOCIETY OF THE". Below this, there is a line of cursive script that appears to say "I hereby certify that". The title "THE HIDDEN INSTITUTION" is printed in large, white, serif capital letters across the middle of the document. Below the title, the author's name is written in a smaller, italicized serif font. The page number "57" is located in the bottom right corner of the page.

THE HIDDEN INSTITUTION

by Jack Duane Warren Jr., executive director

The following lecture was presented at the Symposium on the Founding of The Society of the Cincinnati held at the auditorium of The Phillips Collection on September 19, 2008, as part of the three-day convocation celebrating the society's 225th anniversary.

We generally view the founding of The Society of the Cincinnati through the eyes of its critics, who focused intently on the hereditary principle embodied in the Institution, which suggested to some that the Cincinnati constituted a conspiracy to impose an aristocracy that would dominate the political life of the new nation. Although the controversy over the Society's hereditary provision dissipated fairly quickly, historians have never bothered to examine the Institution for much of anything else. In the process they have missed one of the most interesting and important documents of the revolutionary era.

The Institution is a remarkable document—one of the great documents of our Revolution. The Society pays homage to it each time it meets by reading a section of it the Institution calls the Immutable Principles, but even within the Society we rarely pause to consider the rest of the document or to try to understand the Institution as the founders did.

To understand the Institution as they did, we must begin to reassemble the mental world around it—the preconceptions of its author, Henry Knox, and the men who signed the Institution. This is an exercise in “intellectual archaeology.” Like an archaeologist who works with a shovel, I am going to spend some time digging into the Institution, looking for artifacts—key words and phrases that illuminate the larger meaning—buried in the text. I will take those artifacts out—paying attention to their literal context in the document, but then considering their associated meanings in other contexts that would have had relevance for Knox and the other founders of the Society.

This is also, in a way, an exercise in forgetting. We must forget whatever was learned or what occurred between the time the Institution was written and our own time. We must revive beliefs and definitions discarded, and approach the language of the Institution with great care, as we would an unfamiliar foreign language. For it is the language of a world quite remote from our own. Its words, though mostly familiar, are charged with meanings we no longer attach to them.

We understand this when we read the works of cultures remote in time—when we read Greek tragedy or the works of Dante or Chaucer. If we are wise enough, we remember it when we read Shakespeare and Milton and, of course, the Bible. Yet we find this difficult when approaching the words of the revolutionary generation. Despite their powdered wigs and old-fashioned dress, we often read their language as our language, which it is not. At its simplest it is a dialect with hidden meanings; at its most complicated it is an entirely alien language with a deceptive similarity to our own.

If we read carefully, even a very short part of the Institution—its Preamble, or that portion before the Immutable Principles—is filled with lost meaning.

Parchment and Ink

The original manuscript of the Institution actually conveys meanings even before we begin to read. The first thing most people notice when they look at the original manuscript of the Institution is its irregular shape. Most of the great public documents from the revolutionary era—the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, the Bill of Rights, the Virginia Declaration of Rights—are neat and rectangular. The irregular shape of the Institution of the Society of the Cincinnati is so unusual that we would be quite safe in assuming that it means something—something other than the fact that weren't any scissors handy.

The Institution is in fact engrossed on an untrimmed sheet of parchment, just as it came from the manufacturer. Parchment is animal skin, typically sheepskin or calfskin, stretched thin and treated with lime. The preparation of the skin for making parchment is a very elaborate and labor-intensive process and the resulting product is very expensive. It was, like many specialized products, mostly imported, chiefly from England but also sometimes from the Continent. It was generally sold by stationers and bookbinders and less often by printers.

At its simplest the language of our ancestors is a dialect with hidden meanings—at its most complicated it is an entirely alien language with a deceptive similarity to our own.

We have no way of determining where the parchment used for the Institution was purchased. Parchment was not generally used at army headquarters. Knox probably had it sent from a bookbinder or stationer in New England. Parchment had been used since ancient times. It replaced papyrus and was, in turn, replaced by paper, but it continued to be used for documents of enduring importance. Through the early modern centuries, most of the parchment produced was used by the church, and use of parchment for secular documents, even now, retains something of the sacred. This meaning has grown somewhat tenuous now, but it was not so in the eighteenth century. To the officers of the Continental Army, the sacred nature of a document on parchment was well understood. It was the only material suitable for a document expressing unchanging values, a document expected to endure forever.

The parchment was left untrimmed to give the document the appearance of antiquity. It seems to be unique in this respect among the great documents of the Revolution. The intention seems to have been to associate the Institution with ancient Rome. The revolutionary generation corresponded with a revival of Classical motifs in art and architecture stemming from enthusiasm for Classical literature and spurred by the first serious excavations at Classical sites like Pompeii. But the untrimmed parchment is not an example of Classicism in the normal sense. It seems deliberately archaic—to reach back beyond the Rome of Cicero (the first century B.C.) and Plutarch (the late first century A.D.) to the rougher time of Cincinnatus (519-430 B.C.).

Institution

With that, we should turn to the words themselves. The first to command our attention is the peculiar word “Institution” for a document we would be more likely to call a “Constitution.” To us, “Institution” is synonymous with a formal organization of some kind—a school, a club, a museum, an asylum for the mentally ill—but we occasionally use “Institution” in one of its older senses, that is, to refer to a network of principles, rules, norms and procedures. This is what we mean when we say “the institution of marriage” (I know mine has a confusing network of rules, all of which somehow seem to apply only to me).

This is a somewhat archaic use of “Institution,” but in our case it gets layered together with a related, even older meaning, now also rare,

referring to the most basic principles established at the beginning of something— the fundamental principles, the ones at the foundation. This is the meaning the Protestant reformer John Calvin intended when he titled his great sixteenth century reform manifesto *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, in which he sought to define the basic principles of primitive Christianity before it had been polluted, as the Protestant reformers argued, by centuries of Papal accretions.

Calvin's *Institutes* was well known in Puritan New England, and the term "Institution" was used in the sense Calvin used it in seventeenth and eighteenth century New England church covenants—the formal written and signed documents prepared when new Puritan churches were formed. These church covenants were not unique to America, but they were characteristic of the strains of reformed Protestantism that took deep root in the American colonies and they began influencing secular organizations almost immediately. The Mayflower Compact, signed by the Pilgrims aboard the *Mayflower*, was such a secular covenant, and like the Puritan church covenants it began by invoking the Almighty.

The Supreme Governor of the Universe

So, too, does the Institution, the Society's secular covenant, but in a distinctively eighteenth century way. The Deity invoked in the Institution is "The Supreme Governor of the Universe," a manner of referring to the Lord God that instantly roots the Institution in the eighteenth century Enlightenment. But the God referred to in the Institution is not the God of William Paley, the great popularizer of Enlightenment Deism—the author of *Principles of Moral and Political Philosophy*, and *Natural Theology*, two of the most influential English books of the eighteenth century. Paley is most famous for his analogy of God as a great watchmaker and the universe as a watch, which God created and set in motion. Paley's God does not intervene in the workings of nature. It is this idea of God that Jefferson refers to in the Declaration of Independence when he refers to the "Laws of Nature and of Nature's God."

The God described in the Institution is an active agent in human affairs.

The Supreme Governor of the Universe described in the Institution is a God who created a universe based on Newtonian laws, but his

Providence is manifest. The language of the Institution makes this plain: *“It having pleased The Supreme Governor of the Universe, in the disposition of human affairs, to cause the separation of the Colonies of North America from the domination of Great Britain, and after a bloody conflict of eight years, to establish them Free, Independent and Sovereign States . . .”*

The God described in the Institution is the God of Enlightenment Moderates, not the Radicals for whom the God of Scripture would, in the hands of the French revolutionaries, become a benign and distant Supreme Being. The God described in the Institution is an active agent in human affairs. He is—perhaps this over simplifies a complex issue—Washington’s God, whose hand Washington believed manifested itself at crucial moments in the war. Perhaps it is enough to say that the God described in the Institution is simply a soldier’s God, consistent with the old adage that there are no atheists in foxholes. Perhaps there are no Jeffersonian Deists in them, either.

History

We reach now the crucial passage in the entire Institution. Having asserted that the Independence of the United States is the work of an active God, the Institution discloses the purpose for which the Society was instituted: *“to perpetuate, therefore, the remembrance of this vast event.”*

Presented in this context, the purpose of the Society is above all, to honor God’s purpose and his Providence. Independence, the Institution tells us, is an example of God’s Providence and his care for his special, chosen people. The Institution thus falls into line with a long history of New England thought, stretching back to John Winthrop and his famous injunction to the Puritan settlers of the Massachusetts Bay Colony: *“we must Consider that we shall be as a City upon a Hill, the eyes of all people are upon us; so that if we shall deal falsely with our god in this work we have undertaken and so cause him to withdraw his present help from us, we shall be made a story and a byword through the world.”*

The Supreme Governor has chosen us, the Institutions says, and it is our job to perpetuate the memory of His goodness toward us, but—here by implication that would have been unavoidable to an eighteenth-century reader, especially a New Englander—if we should forget God’s help, he may chose to withdraw his protection, and we may lose our independence and our liberties.

For the revolutionary generation this idea had a secular analog, given clearest expression by Machiavelli in his *Discourses*—a text well known to educated Americans that expressed an idea familiar to many more—that republican liberty is exceedingly fragile, and that if men forget the deeds by which their liberties were secured, their republics would crumble and men would lose those liberties.

Perpetuating the memory of the Revolutionary War was thus both a moral and a political enterprise. History, for the men who signed the Institution and created the Society, was not merely an academic undertaking. It was a reflection of religious obligation and was a building block of civic virtue—that willingness to sacrifice one's own interests and even one's own life for the good of the community—which republican theorists through time had argued is essential for the survival of republics. In this sense the Institution is an intensely Washingtonian document, and its authorship by a young New Englander, so evident in the opening passage that focuses on Divine Providence, can be identified here as the work of a protégé of Washington's, as young Henry Knox clearly was.

Washington had little interest in history as an academic undertaking, but he was fascinated by historical figures as models of character and accomplishment. He was convinced that virtue—the civic virtue celebrated by ancient writers and revived by Renaissance theorists—could ensure the survival of the republic. Washington sought, from the moment the Revolution began, to become such an historical character himself. We can see in Washington the sense that the most ambitious men of the moment had, that the Revolution was an opportunity to establish themselves as trans-historical great men like the heroes out of Classical antiquity they had been taught to admire from youth.

Washington and others sought to turn their lives into symbols of republican virtue.

Washington, Franklin, Adams and others all demonstrate this kind of ambition. They sought to turn their lives into symbols of republican virtue so they would be remembered for all time. Washington's conduct can only be understood in this context. His acceptance of command of the Continental Army while refusing to accept pay, his unwavering modesty as a commander, his resistance to efforts to use the army as a political tool, and finally his resignation and

subsequent reluctance to be pulled back into public life—all point to Washington’s consciousness of himself as an historical actor who would ultimately be judged on the quality of his character as a model of civic virtue.

Sentiment

Eighteenth-century philosophers expended an enormous amount of mental energy on considering the source of virtue. Some argued that what looked like virtuous conduct was only a kind of enlightened selfishness and not selflessness at all. Pursuing this line of reasoning, some contended that the desire for honor and fame, described as “the ruling passion of the noblest minds” could substitute for true selflessness.

Others did not possess such a dark view of humanity, and contended that mankind possesses an innate moral sense that leads him to take true, selfless pleasure in the happiness of others. This spirit of benevolence, they contended, did not flow from a calculation of self-interest but from a genuine concern for the welfare of others. This concern was held to operate like gravity; its pull being closest to the people closest to us, and growing weaker as we are more distantly connected.

Benevolence, the basis of true virtue according to many writers, was the product of sentiment, not of cool, rational calculation. We imagine the Revolutionary generation as intensely rational; it is to the nineteenth century that we look for sentimentality. But the Institution suggests that the heart was more important than the head to the officers who formed the Cincinnati.

The Institution suggests that the heart was more important than the head to the officers who formed the Cincinnati.

The proof of this is the Institution’s emphasis on friendship as the foundation of the Society. The Institution pairs the perpetuation of the memory of the Revolution with the continuation of friendships formed under the pressure of common danger and in many instances, cemented by the blood of the parties.

The Institution is not the only great relic of the Revolution to assert that civic virtue depends on sentiment rather than rational calculation.

Late in the war Washington created the first decoration awarded in the American Army, called the "Badge of Military Merit." It was only available to non-commissioned officers and enlisted men to indicate that great virtue could be found in any man, regardless of rank. This badge was the predecessor of the Purple Heart, but it was not associated with wounds in battle. It was a piece of heart-shaped purple cloth sewn on a jacket over the man's actual heart which allowed the wearer to pass guards and sentinels as officer were allowed to do.

John Marshall, who was an officer in the Virginia Line, later described the founding of the Cincinnati in terms that illuminate the sentimental foundation of the Institution:

the sentiments with which the officers of the American army contemplated a final separation from each other, those only can be incapable of forming an idea, who are strangers to the choicest feelings of the human heart. Companions in virtuous suffering, in danger, and in glory; attached to each other by common exertions made in a severe struggle for a common object; to part forever, they deemed a calamity too affecting to be supported. The means of perpetuating those friendships which had been formed, and of renewing that endearing social intercourse which had taken place in camp, were universally desired. Perhaps too that esprit de corps which, identifying the individual with the community, transfers to the aggregate of the society a portion of that self love which is felt by every private person, and which inspires the members with a repugnance to the dissolution of the political, not unlike in effect to that which is excited at the dissolution of the natural body, was not without its influence in suggesting some expedient which might preserve the memory of the army, which it cheered the officers who were on the point of separating, with the hope that the separation would not be eternal: that a distant intervals, they might still communicate with each other: that the bonds by which they were connected would not be totally dissolved: and that for many beneficial purposes, the patriots of the American army would still form one great society.

Cincinnatus

I come finally to Cincinnatus. The preamble to the Institution ends with an explanation of the Society's name:

The officers of the American Army having generally been taken from the citizens of America, possess high veneration for the character of that illustrious Roman, Lucius Quintus Cincinnatus; and being resolved to follow his example, by returning to their citizenship, they think they may with propriety denominate themselves The Society of the Cincinnati.

Some aspects of the story of Cincinnatus are familiar to us today—particularly those aspects of his story that Washington so consciously followed—his interest in the cultivation of his farm, his reluctance to accept power or rewards and his resignation at the earliest possible moment. But the story of Cincinnatus was better known 225 years ago, and there are aspects of the story that were meaningful to the men who signed the Institution as well as their critics.

Cincinnatus was a symbol of civic virtue, but he was also a symbol of aristocracy. Not only had Cincinnatus led the armies of Rome to victory and then returned to his farm. He also crushed a plebian uprising and

resisted political reforms to empower plebians. Cincinnatus, in short, was a virtuous hero, but not a man of the people. He was a complex symbol.

The original members presented themselves as part of an aristocracy of merit, available to answer the call of their country and worthy of public trust.

This fact would be raised by critics of the Society, and it was certainly known to the Society's founders when they adopted the name. Indeed there is no reason to doubt that the founders imagined that their Society formed a new kind of aristocracy—an aristocracy of

merit, consisting of men whose virtue had been demonstrated on the battlefield—and who could therefore be trusted with leadership in time of peace. We take it for granted that aristocracy is incompatible with republican institutions. But this was not entirely clear in 1783. The most important writers on republicanism in the English language—the late seventeenth century theorists James Harrington and Algernon Sydney—had held that aristocracy in some form was actually necessary for the preservation of republican institutions.

The Cincinnati sought no recognition from government, and its founders could claim—as some did—that it was a private organization with no institutional claim to power. The original members were generally not shy about identifying themselves with the Society however, as the many original members who had portraits painted wearing their Eagles indicates. By doing so they were, implicitly, presenting themselves as part of an aristocracy of merit, available to answer the call of their country and worthy of public trust.

The Natural History of Nations

If Cincinnatus himself was a figure of somewhat mixed meaning, as I suggest—on the one hand the embodiment of civic virtue and on the other, a symbol of aristocracy—why did Knox gravitate toward Cincinnatus?

To some extent his hand was forced. Before the Revolution, Cincinnatus was familiar to most Americans with an education in the Classics. The story of Cincinnatus can be found in the works of Livy, Pliny and Plutarch, and it was probably through the latter that it was best known in America. But references to Cincinnatus in American writings are hard to find before 1775. Before the outbreak of the war Americans did not identify with Cincinnatus, and his story had little relevance for them.

Indeed it was probably the sort of story least likely to appeal to Americans of 1760 or even 1770. The reason takes me back to where I began, when examining the manuscript Institution as an object. Cincinnatus was a character from a primitive period in the history of Rome, from the early Republic, from the rude and unrefined period of Roman history.

Americans of the late colonial period tended to be defensive about the primitive state of American development in relation to Europe in general, and Britain in particular. Even during the Imperial crisis of the 1760s and 1770s, Americans tended to avoid comparisons with primitive characters and societies, claiming instead that they deserved equal representation in the British Parliament because the American colonies were, or were fast becoming, as cosmopolitan and advanced as Britain.

The outbreak of war changed that dynamic almost instantly. Finding

themselves at war with Britain, Americans quickly embraced the idea that America was, indeed, a bit rough and unrefined, even somewhat primitive. The reason for this sudden change is tied to contemporary natural science as it was applied to society, or what would come to be known later as sociology. Eighteenth-century writers on social development viewed the development of nations as an analog to human development, involving birth, youth, adulthood and old age. Each had its dominant characteristics.

Youth was assumed to be vigorous and strong, a bit rough and unrefined, governed by passions but also tending toward benevolence, as the least selfish age. Adulthood was a period of maturity and strength, but of increasing selfishness, less governed by benevolence or altruism. In old age, decay and corruption inevitably consumed nations; they became mired in luxury and decadence, leading to their death.

Until the outbreak of war, Americans were proud to connect themselves with the manly adulthood of the British Empire, but as war began they argued that Britain had finally slipped into the venality and corruption of national old age. They gloried in claiming that America had become a new nation, rude and unrefined, yes, but also vigorous and virtuous.

Americans embraced Cincinnatus because he was a symbol of the virtues of a vigorous youth, a role Americans were suddenly proud to play.

The American embrace of the primitive at this moment is quite startling. Colonial Americans had aimed to recreate the mother country, and despised the wilderness and other aspects of America that suggested that it was not part of, and not fit for, association with metropolitan British culture. It is at this moment that the American Indian becomes a symbol of virtue—a noble savage—instead of a despised enemy. Franklin appears in Paris in a coonskin hat, playing the American primitive to the hilt. The implications of this transition for American culture in all its forms are enormous.

Americans embraced Cincinnatus in 1775, and proclaimed Washington the new Cincinnatus, not simply because Cincinnatus offered a model of virtue, but because he was a symbol of the virtues of a vigorous youth, a role Americans were suddenly proud to play. The undemocratic aspects of the story of Cincinnatus do not seem to have

concerned anyone in 1775, because at that moment the Revolution was not a democratic movement. By the 1780s, however, the democratic implications of the revolutionary idea of universal equality—or at least universal equality for white males—was becoming clear, and Cincinnatus had become a symbol with somewhat mixed meaning, providing an opening for the Society's critics that had not been apparent to Knox and his fellow officers.

Conclusion

The Institution of the Society has much to tell us about the ideals of the Society's founders if only we read it as they did. As a document illustrating the intellectual foundations of the Revolution it bears comparison with the greatest of our state papers. It reflects the values and aims of the men who fought and won our War for Independence—not men who sat on the sidelines, comfortable in political posts, content to theorize while others fought and died. The achievement of the men who signed the Institution touches us every day, and their ideas deserve a greater share of our attention.

Jack Duane Warren Jr., is executive director of The Society of the Cincinnati. He is the author of The Presidency of George Washington (2000) and an editor of the Presidential Series of The Papers of George Washington.



